

Promoting a Culture of Safety

After piloting the new Ontario Safety Association for Community and Healthcare (OSACH) Health and Safety Management System, three long term care homes operated by the Regional Municipality of Halton in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe are well on their way toward establishing a culture of safety.

Sheldon Wolfson, director of services for seniors at Halton, learned about the Health and Safety Management System during a presentation by OSACH president and CEO Joseline Sikorski at a meeting of the Ontario Association for Non-Profit Homes for Seniors in 2007. "I approached her afterwards and said this was something I really wanted our homes participating in," recalled Wolfson.

At first, the idea was to limit the pilot to one long term care home, but OSACH agreed to Halton's request for a division-wide rollout. Participating long term care facilities included Allendale, a 200-bed home in Milton; Post Inn Village, a 228-bed facility in Oakville; and Creekway Village, a 144-bed home in Burlington. All of the other five pilot sites were hospitals.

The first step in the process was to provide the senior management team at the Halton's Services for Seniors Division with an overview of the Health and Safety Management System. "We were all provided with training (by an OSACH consultant) and did an audit to see how compliant we were," said Patti Coates, manager of continuing quality improvement and risk management. "From that point on, we got senior management buy-in to proceed with the pilot and developed a steering committee with representation from senior management, middle management and front-line employees, including nursing, dietary and life-enrichment staff."

by Norm Tollinsky

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Making safety an organization-wide priority

OSACH's Health and Safety Management System elevates health and safety on an organization-wide basis—from the executive suite to the front-line worker. Senior management had been involved in health and safety in the past, but the OSACH pilot transformed it from an "add-on" to "an everyday activity," said Wolfson. "It's everyone's responsibility and it's the responsibility of senior management to ensure there's a culture of safety in the organization that comes not only from the bottom up through the health and safety committees, but also from the top down. That was one of the major benefits and one of the major thrusts of the OSACH pilot."

Wolfson and his senior management team demonstrate their commitment to health and safety through walkabouts. Every four to six weeks, the senior manager of a home, along with either Wolfson or Coates, selects an area or department in which to engage staff and review health and safety practices. "We'll go up to someone and ask, 'If there's a fire in the kitchen, where would you go to pull the alarm or where would you go to get a fire extinguisher?'" said Wolfson. "It's a little intimidating to have a director or administrator walk up to a front-line staff person and ask a question,

but they're getting used to it and it has really helped to identify educational opportunities for us."

Talking about safety

Another change resulting from the pilot is the increased effectiveness of the health and safety committees at the three homes. Prior to the pilot, the committees met for one hour every month. Now they meet for a full day every other month and are involved in reviewing the health and safety ramifications of any new policies prior to implementation. "They're actively involved in policy reviews, audits and advising management on health and safety issues," said Coates. "We've really seen a big difference in how our management and staff are working together. There's much stronger collaboration as a result of the OSACH pilot."

A risk assessment conducted as part of the pilot identified musculoskeletal disorders resulting from resident handling as the primary type of injury among staff. This prompted the steering committee to develop a resident-in-motion program to educate staff on proper procedures for transferring and repositioning residents. "People are coming into homes older and with more complex needs because there is more support

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in the community,” said Wolfson, “so mobility is more of an issue.”

Provincial government funding for more lift aids over the last five years has helped, but Wolfson points out that personal support workers are still subject to push and pull injuries related to lifting. “We’re also dealing with cognitive issues that impact care delivery,” added Coates. “One day, a resident may be very compliant during a transfer. The next day, the personal support worker may approach the resident and find that during a transfer, the resident becomes very resistant. That also results in injuries.”

One-on-one coaching, information sessions, a health and safety newsletter and the placement of signage with safety messages throughout the homes are used to educate staff. “We’re starting to see that the needle is bending the other way,” said Coates. “People are now talking about safety. We have also implemented safety as an operational initiative in any new policies we develop. We’re

addressing safety in our job postings and in our performance reviews, so we’re really hitting it hard.”

A holistic approach to worker safety

The OSACH program rejects the traditional silo approach to health and safety, opting instead for a holistic approach embracing worker safety, resident safety and infection control. “We know through evidence that you can’t separate staff safety from resident safety, because one impacts the other,” remarked Coates. “If we make improvements around staff safety, we’re definitely going to see improvements in resident safety.”

Wolfson offered the following advice to other long term care homes adopting the OSACH health and safety management model: “First, be prepared for a front-end load in education and implementation. Second, your senior staff and your governing body have to buy in. If they don’t, you’re

dead in the water. Third, it takes time. This is not a two- or three-week commitment, so you have to be patient.”

Coates echoed the need to make a long-term commitment. “We didn’t look at the pilot as an event that’s going to end,” she said. “We looked at it as changing our culture. That’s something you have to get your head around because if you don’t accept it as a cultural change, it could send the wrong message to your front-line staff.”

It is still too early to link the adoption of the OSACH Health and Safety Management System to a reduction in the frequency or severity of injuries at Halton’s three long term care homes. However, qualitative evidence points to a noticeable change in staff behaviour. “People are internalizing a culture of safety,” said Wolfson. “They’re identifying unsafe practices, and recognizing that they can bring issues to the attention of management without fearing a punitive response.” **LTC**

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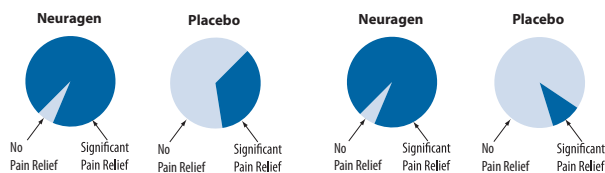
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